

BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

None But Ourselves Can Free Our Minds: Review of *A Community Life: Memoirs of Alfred M. Sears*

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Abstract

Review of *A Community Life: Memoirs of Alfred M. Sears: A Redemption Story from Reform School to Attorney General and Minister of Education of The Bahamas*, Alfred M. Sears. I-EASE Publishack, 2017. ISBN 978-978-8201-14-4

This emotionally charged testimonial to life in the historical colonial and postcolonial Bahamas is a deeply politicized story of personal and political redemption built on Alfred Sears' decades-long commitment to literacy and education, to the value of family and community and to the practice of speaking truth to power. Sears argues that both the health of Bahamian society and the sovereignty of the nation are dependent on its citizens being able to think for themselves and for that to happen, it is imperative to root out the legacies of colonialism. He makes recommendations for altering the Bahamian Constitution and thematically addresses concerns about government corruption, transparency, and accountability; partisan polarization; the Bahamian politic as a system of patronage and clientelism; the need for constitutional reform; political campaign finance reform; sustained economic development and participatory regionalism.

In the Process of Becoming: A Purpose-Driven Life

At the heart of this compelling, culturally rich memoir is a man of sharp intellect and compassion whose philosophical and moral commitments to education, community, jurisprudence and equal rights function as critical agents of human hope and possibility. Sears has written a life story that captures Herculean struggles and triumphs over economic, emotional, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual challenges. He made a promise to himself, as an inmate at the Boys Industrial School, to “envision an alternate world for myself” and through formal education to “prepare myself to

contribute to my country and the world” (p. 16). His memoir is a meticulous recounting of how he has kept that promise and it serves as a “ladder to help others to elevate themselves from turbulent times, and to do even more than they could have imagined” (p. 16). Sears envisages a unified, more democratic, postcolonial Bahamas and his writing is infused with purposeful optimism.

In the *Prologue*, Sears gives credit to Barbadian novelist, essayist and poet George Lamming, who describes Sears' life story as a “remarkable document of self-reflection and public revelation” (p. 11), for his encouragement and writer's advice. Lamming's interest was piqued by a speech

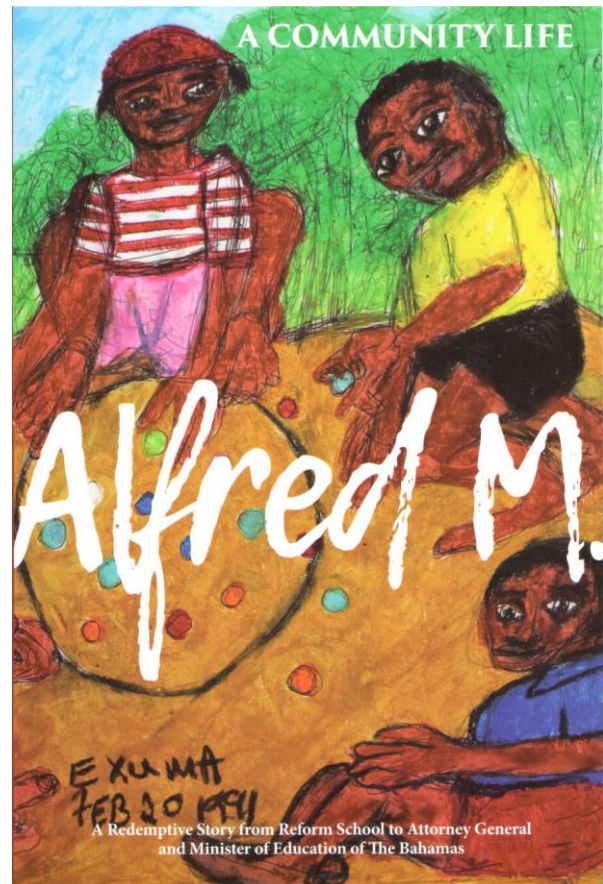
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that Sears had given to high school students about Sears' early life and his relationship with his mother; thus, Lamming urged Sears to "tell [his] story and the story of [his] mother" (p. 13). Emboldened by his friend's encouragement, Sears produced this remarkable "redemption story" of 27 detailed chapters that cover his life from early childhood to the present. He also pays tribute "to the many persons who mentored and inspired [him]" and declares that he hopes that his memoir will inspire not only his own children but also "those everywhere in difficult circumstances, especially young people" (p. 16). Education had freed him from the formidable situations of his early life and thus, he extols education as both a liberating and transformative experience for the young, in particular, for those in the working class.

Sears' essential purpose in writing his life story is to communicate a strong sense of personal and cultural identity, a purpose he achieves through a productive dialogue between the past and the present, the personal and the public. His memories flow between the levels of self, family, community and nation and he locates these complex articulations in relation to knowledge, power and critical social thinking. In his encyclopaedic recording of the political, economic and cultural conditions of The Bahamas, Sears writes as an "articulate antagonist" (Parry, 2004, p. 22) in the sense that he seems determined to disrupt Euro-centric discourse, to trouble the colonial thinking that still lingers in the structures, policies and practices of Bahamian institutions, and to launch his far-reaching development vision for national transformation and change. He positions himself as the "product of a survival story" (p. 379) and creates a "rich tapestry of the Caribbean experience" (p. 379) by drawing on his experience of the Bahamian Diaspora and

the Black Atlantic.



Situated as a child growing up as a colonial subject and as an adult living in a postcolonial society, Sears offers a lucid portrayal of that history through personal anecdote and narrative. He advocates that counter-narratives to the colonial past be told that emphasise the lives of those who resisted and survived colonial exploitation (Curry, 2017), stories that supplant the master narratives that depict black marginalisation and oppression and tend to inflame "inequalities and racial antagonism" (Curry, 2017, p. 193). Sears argues that counter-narratives of courage and perseverance will offer a sense of hope and possibility to young people who come from challenging circumstances yet who "have dreams...and only need the opportunity to be mentored, touched and encouraged to create other narratives of survival, triumph and

service” (Sears, 2017, p. 381). Stating that he believes that it is “in [these counter-narratives] that we will find the key for rebuilding confidence to unleash the creative imagination and intellect of our people, to construct sustainable development, and to build plural democratic societies for the Caribbean” (p. 21), Sears links counter-narratives to larger projects of nation-building.

In several sections of this memoir, Sears begins to expose racial politics and practices based on “formal bonds of slavery and direct colonial control” that continue to influence a “lingering racial ideology of white supremacy in the Caribbean reflected in [concepts] of beauty, power, capacity and wealth” (p. 20). For even well after the ending of slavery, racial politics continued to contribute to racial divisions within the people of The Bahamas. Curry (2017) points to the historical origins of the

... racial divide [that] continued to exist with many of the off-shore cays—including Elbow Cay, Guana Cay, Man-o-War Cay and Cherokee—constituted as all white settlements...Afro-Bahamians were forced to leave the island before sunset, in order to comply with the rigid racial policies of these all white communities (Curry, p. 192; see Craton & Saunders, 2000).

Had Sears referenced such historical records of racial exclusion in The Bahamas, his attempt to analyse Bahamian racial politics and practices would have been more persuasive and perhaps the racial divisions of the present society might have been better understood.

However, Sears aptly explains how the systemic white colonial world-view was passed on through the systems of government and institutions that were adopted in The Bahamas immediately after Independence. He

acknowledges that the implanting of colonial ways of thinking into the Caribbean elites at the time of Independence was one of the veiled successes of British policy in the Caribbean (Girvan, 2015) that had the paralysing effect of preserving the social legacy of colonialism. George Lamming (2002) captures this insidious process:

The various constitutional settlements that led to independence had a decisive influence in preserving much of the social legacy of the colonial. Moreover, the tactical withdrawal the British now so proudly call decolonisation, simply made way for a new colonial orchestration (p. 1).

Colonial ways of thinking that contributed to racial antagonisms and racial divisions are still manifest in the thinking of local populations through people’s taken-for-granted, everyday values and practices; their accepted racialised ‘norms’ of the society are such vestiges of colonialism that can be found hidden in most Bahamian institutions today.

Sears makes a strong case for Bahamians to be critically liberated from the mental conditioning of such colonial legacies. He proposes critical thinking as a major way to transform lives and expands upon the principle of freeing the mind from past conditioning. Sears claims that both the health of individual Bahamian citizens, the Bahamian society and the sovereignty of the nation are dependent on its citizens being able to think for themselves. Borrowing from Bob Marley’s 1980 *Redemption Song* whose lyrics include: “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds,” Sears paraphrases: “[we must] free ourselves from mental slavery” (p. 21), thus providing a counter-balance to colonial history.

He had the opportunity to act on that assumption when, in 2002, he was “plunged

into elective politics” (p. 235) and served as Minister of Education. His commitment to literacy and education for all was amply demonstrated first, by his critique of a weak and failing Bahamian school system and second, by his community actions as Minister of Education that began to change that nonperforming system. Sears’ appointment as Attorney General then focused his attention on thinking critically about the ways in which “the law as a social construct” could be used as a “means of petition and challenge” to ensure that “the laws and jurisprudence of the Caribbean [are] relevant to emerging independent countries, and to reverse the legacies of a slave and colonial past” (p. 308). Sears’ interpretation of the law also reflects a theme repeated in his life journey, that of an urgent preoccupation with anti-colonialism and the need for building national identity.

Performing the Art of Self-Representation: A Postcolonial, Political Generation

Sears’ choice to write in the genre of memoir fits with his desire “to create and recreate [his] life journey” (p. 382) and to engage in an interpretation of his life that invests the past and present and the private and public self with coherence and meaning. By combining both historical and emotional truths, he identifies and weaves together key themes from his remembered events of the past and present and practices the art of self-representation.

One such remembered event took place in 1967, shortly after the PLP won The Bahamas general election, achieving black majority rule. The Headmaster of Saint Augustine’s College, Father Bonaventure Dean, gave a series of public talks on black awareness and black power. These ideologies had recently been imported into The Bahamas and had upset many people. He declared that “Bahamians had to go beyond the ‘black is beautiful’ stage to nation-building where the black man must assume the responsibility of

making a significant contribution to his own nation and the world” (McCartney, 1974, p. 175). Inspired by such passionate rhetoric coming from the well-respected black man they admired, many black young people began to think beyond the popular culture messages of the day such as James Brown’s 1968 song, “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud!” and to conceive of black identity as being framed by social, political, cultural, economic and historical influences that had imposed colonial oppression upon previous generations. Alfred M. Sears was a member of that young, postcolonial, “political generation” (Hall, 2017, p. 44) and although most of them were understandably driven and idealistic, they never resorted to violence to achieve change. Instead, they embraced the “quiet revolution” as captured by Senator Doris L. Johnson (1972) in her classic text, *The Quiet Revolution in The Bahamas*.

It was a turbulent but exciting time of cultural transition; The Bahamas was situated between the colonial and postcolonial worlds in a geopolitical space of anti-colonial struggle against colonial subjugation, a struggle that was being influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Students in Alfred Sears’ Form 3 English literature class at St. Augustine’s College (SAC) memorized and recited Martin Luther King’s speech, “I Have a Dream”, and students in the Honours Reading Club listened to a vinyl, 78 RPM recording of a speech by Malcolm X and debated the pros and cons of Black Nationalism. Malcolm X’s message was that black people needed to become re-educated, politically conscious, politically mature and politically active.

Black students were becoming increasingly aware and proud of their racialised bodies; Afros were “in” and the first black children’s dolls had appeared on the island. It was no longer taboo to use the word *black* to describe yourself or your family. The young people

were exploring the meaning of their black identity against a backdrop of cultural colonialization (Hall, 2017, p. 21) and they were “evolving a definite philosophy of blackness” (McCartney, 1974, p. 167) and black consciousness. Sears remembers the influence that the black awareness high school curriculum had on him: “At SAC, I [learned] about the ideas of Pan-Africanism and Black Power from Fr. Bonaventure Dean, my teachers at SAC and from my reading” (p. 131). Having been stimulated by that foundational knowledge, he enrolled in university courses at Columbia University that further enabled him to “deepen [his] knowledge of Africa, its civilizations, literature, philosophy, successes, struggle, and activities to increase [his] knowledge as a member of the African Diaspora” (p. 131). He began to unlearn the negative racial stereotyping he had been subject to as a young person growing up in The Bahamas.

Making a Commitment to the Ideology of Caring & Compassion

In addition to reflecting Sears’ verbal, administrative and legal acumen, his memoir captures his decades-long, unwavering commitment to the ideology of caring and compassion. One could conclude, after reading about the extreme physical, emotional and psychological ruptures of his early childhood, including being sexually assaulted at age seven, that he would never have had the emotional strength or desire for social activism and communal leadership, yet that is the loving spirit that pervades his life story.

He traces his faith in the potential goodness of others to the unconditional maternal care he received from his mother, a woman who was “the dominant influence” in his life: “my life was saved by Mummy’s daily expressions of unconditional love” (p. 57). He admires her “brilliant mind” and although unfortunate economic and personal circumstances prevented his mother from realizing her

dreams, Sears believes he lived them for her, vicariously: “I am the manifestation of my mother’s dreams: a dream deferred for herself, but one that she tried to nourish and realize in each of the twelve children she birthed and single-handed[ly] raised” (pp. 27-28). In later life, he encouraged his mother to write a journal of her early life and reading it helped him to understand his own identity.

Sears creates a separate section of his memoir based on his mother’s inspiring life story. He captures the deep gratitude for the role his mother played in his and his siblings’ upbringing: “With limited material possessions, we, her children, were each sustained by Mummy’s unconditional maternal care of each of us, her broad intellectual interests, her wit, and the values of hard work, thriftiness, decency, and respect for all people” (p. 59). He observes that although his mother was shy and often lacked confidence, her “[openness] to ideas and friendships with people around her” (p. 56) had a profound effect on him that continues today.

During his “early challenging years” Sears was also influenced by the overseers at the Reform School and several teachers in the Roman Catholic schools he attended. The pursuit of knowledge was valued and the students felt nurtured by teachers who practiced the healing philosophy of agape—a special form of love that is demonstrated in caring and activism. In the Bahamian context of the 1960s and early 1970s, agape produced a wave of community awareness and a desire for positive engagement with others at the grass-roots level. The nuns, priests and lay people who modelled the values of community during Sears’ youth made a significant impression on the young man, and although he is still “[in disagreement] with the historical role [that] the Catholic Church had played in the slave trade in Africa and the Americas” (p. 70), he pays tribute in his

memoir to the “humanizing role of St. Francis Cathedral [in alleviating] the poverty within [his] community of Bain Town, through the provision of free education, health care, athletic facilities, [and food relief] in the face of an indifferent colonial state” (p. 69).

Constructing a Public Self

What are we to take away from viewing the clusters of tiny black and white photographs that dot the pages of Sears’ memoir and how do these photographs influence the way we read and interpret his life story? There is a taken for granted assumption that photographs can capture and summarise a part of a person’s life and character (Harrison, 1996). Some photographs, more than others, can be taken as particularly indicative of the nature of the author’s values and character but there is no single, grand or correct interpretation of photos; photographs attract multiple interpretations.

The images in this book are both factual and metaphorical; situated in Bahamian culture, time and practice, they not only speak to the nature of Sears’ memories and his depiction of the past, they also show how he socially constructs and represents himself publicly in the present. They offer insight into the familial, legal and political persona of the man.

His family and school photos include the important women, children and men in Sears’ early life and the more intimate photos of his mother, his siblings and of Sears with his wife and children give rich testimony to his personal life. The boundaries between Sears’ personal and political identity begin to blur; on the one hand, these photos seem to mirror the certainty of a fixed self-identity that springs from Sears’ nostalgic memories of childhood, yet his representation of self is styled more broadly through other public photos that are largely contingent on the external influences of his professional life.

Photos of Sears positioned beside powerful men who are in positions of authority stand out: He is pictured next to Cuban President Fidel Castro (p. 262), American President Bill Clinton, South African President Thabo Mbeki (p. 332), Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (p. 335), and Bahamian Prime Ministers Hubert Ingraham (p. 375) and Perry Christie (p. 294). These images send an unmistakable message about the centrality of Sears’ public political persona. They also hint at a possible projected, public, future identity: Do these images intimate where Sears’ political career might be taking him—perhaps, to becoming the next Prime Minister?

Important aspects of Sears’ legal-political self are firmly rooted in the inter-cultural experiences of the many years he spent in classrooms, courts and government offices in The Bahamas, Jamaica, the United States and other countries. For example, certain images speak to his view of public service (pp. 231-234). Sears defines being a public servant as “working with and on behalf of the constituents, solving problems, and crafting and implementing community projects and programmes” (p. 369). The photo of his legal mentor, Justice Seymour Schwartz of the Civil Court of Manhattan (p. 167), represents the beginnings of Sears’ legal career. There is also a ritual legal photo taken at the Red Mass at St. Francis Xavier Cathedral at the beginning of the 2005 Legal Year (pp. 308-309). Sears, who served as Attorney General from 2002-2006, is seen standing with the Chief Justice and Fellow Justices of the Supreme Court, other members of the judiciary and members of the bar. The image is a powerful reminder of his respected position in the Bahamian judiciary and legal community.

Sears’ commitment to Bahamian youth and education emerges in a photograph of him supervising the renovation of the Fort

Charlotte Community Centre in 2002, a project that he designed and fully supported. It speaks to Sears' desire to be "an agent of change in The Bahamas" (p. 209). The messages behind the photographs continue Sears' testimony to the need for a vibrant public service, for elected officials to fulfil their sacred obligation to carry the public trust by protecting the rights of the people and for all of us to practice care and compassion.

Government & Governing: "Winner Takes All"

Sears' memoir is grounded in an unwavering concern for the common good of the people and as he recounts the on-going efforts and sacrifices he chose to make for the benefit of the Bahamian people, he directs readers' emotions to the goals of a nation. Great political leaders understand the

need to touch citizens' hearts and to inspire, deliberately, strong emotions directed at the common work before them. All political principles, the good as well as the bad, need emotional support to ensure their stability over time, and all decent societies need to guard against division and hierarchy by cultivating sentiments of sympathy and love (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 3).

He thematically addresses concerns about government corruption, transparency, and accountability; partisan polarization; the Bahamian politic as a system of patronage and clientelism; the need for constitutional reform; political campaign finance reform; and sustained economic development and participatory regionalism.

Upon independence, the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, as a former colony of the United Kingdom, inherited the Westminster model as its form of government. The Westminster model guaranteed that the British colonial heritage would continue to influence how democracy is practised in the country. As Girvan (2015) observes:

"independence was about the entrenchment of the two-Party system ... and preservation of the laws, institutions, and symbols of the colonial state" (p. 97). There was tacit acceptance of the political institutions of the departing colonizers, the retention of their political institutions and the adoption of their norms and values by default.

The Westminster System is characterized by the fusion of executive and legislative powers. In recent years, scholars are beginning to question if Westminster institutions are suitable to the Caribbean political context, as they primarily generate extreme partisan polarization, top-down authoritarian leadership, the victimization of political opponents, and the exploitation of state resources to finance clientelism and patronage (Hinds, 2008, pp. 394-395; Girvan, 2015, pp. 101-102). A familiar pattern of "winner takes all" (Ryan, 1999) governing emerges:

Politics is a perpetual game of alternating ins and outs and winner takes all. It is characterised mainly by mudslinging, sensationalism, and [the] pursuit of trivia. Every five years, a cornucopia of election campaign promises is routinely made. Few are kept. People's participation is limited to cheering at election rallies and a 10-second act of voting every five years. Government is reduced to prime ministerial dictatorship. Long-term issues of development are hardly ever on the agenda of popular political discourse (Girvan, 2015, p. 99).

Sears boldly critiques the Westminster System and makes a plea for increasing the democratization of The Bahamas, yet he is also wary of the daunting task of reforming Westminster institutions in a small island country in which "ever'n know' y'ah biz-ness":

People are generally aware of each other's political affiliations, resulting in the almost complete absence of political

anonymity for individual citizens. In the context of strong partisan polarization, this means that the supposedly impartial and neutral functioning of Westminster institutions like the civil service, the electoral commission, the ombudsman, and the judiciary is virtually impossible to realize (Hinds, 2008, pp. 21-22).

Sears states the problem with bleak precision:

The present governance structure of The Bahamas is authoritarian, without the checks and balances upon which to build a robust representative democracy. I believe that this vertical concentration of power has a chilling effect on political dissent, and erodes the function of elected parliamentary representatives in the House of Assembly. It is inefficient, as civil servants are afraid to enforce legislation without political direction from the Cabinet (p. 348).

With the deft strokes of a plastic surgeon, he advocates for altering the face of the Bahamian Constitution through far-reaching recommendations that include: separating the legislative and executive functions; creating transparency and accountability in government, ending discrimination against women; making non-political appointments of the judiciary; creating an independent constituency boundary commission, creating various “integrity mechanisms” (for impeachment, examination of misconduct and corruption, etc.), and increasing citizen participation in governance, to name a few (pp. 344-369). As Sears so consistently makes clear throughout his memoir, there is a need to seriously consider the inadequacies of the Westminster model of parliamentary

democracy in The Bahamas, to analyse and transform its institutions and to create a new form of Bahamian democracy that encourages and supports sovereignty, development, social justice and environmental stewardship.

Conclusion

Alfred M. Sears courageously shares the details of his personal and professional life journey in a multi-layered story of “survival and triumph over adversity” (p. 379). His memoir is also an emotionally charged testimonial to life in the historical colonial and postcolonial Bahamas. In the interests of building a more ethical and just Bahamas, he crafts a deeply politicized story of personal and political redemption built on his decades-long commitment to literacy and education, to the value of family and community building and to the practice of speaking truth to power.

Sears unearths life stories that have had a powerful influence on his life. He provides an analysis of personal, local and national identity framed by richly evocative themes that are evident throughout the book: the importance of family and unconditional love; the violence of childhood sexual abuse; the dichotomy of the colonizer-colonized; the binary of black and white; the dynamics of gendered relationships; the inadequacies of the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy in relation to Bahamian democracy and governance and the dangers of the abuse of power. Woven through these compelling themes is the author’s unshakable sense of gratefulness for life and his heartfelt compassion for the lives of family, friends, colleagues and all Bahamians.

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